In Defense of Anti-Racist Training

MYISHA CHERRY

Abstract
I will argue for anti-racist training in federal and state funded programs. In order to do so, I will begin by discussing recent events occurring in the United States that have challenged such training. I will analyze criticisms of anti-racist programs, focusing particularly on those that began with the Trump administration and continue today. I will then consider what is happening in response and as a result of these criticisms, as well as make some suggestions for what should happen going forward.

In September of 2020, President Trump issued Executive Order 13950 that expressed concern for concepts and histories that were being taught in anti-racist training. His office also issued a memo to federal agencies, echoing in non-legal language some of the spirit of the executive order. In addition, there was a commission held at the White House on U.S. History to protest and counter what were perceived as inaccuracies in historical accounts expressed in the training. However, it was the executive order that had the power to do things on the ground. Here are some excerpts from the order:

> From the battlefield of Gettysburg to the bus boycott in Montgomery, and the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, heroic Americans have valiantly risked their lives to ensure that their children would grow up in a nation living out its creed, expressed in the Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…' It was the belief in this inherent equality of every individual that inspired the founding generation to risk their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to establish a new nation, unique among the countries of the world. Thanks to the courage and sacrifice of our forebears. America has made significant progress toward realization of a national creed. Today, however, many people are pushing a different vision of America that is grounded in hierarchies, based on collective social and political identities, rather than in the inherent and equal dignity of every person as an individual. This ideology is rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country, that some people, simply on account of their race or sex are oppressors.

doi:10.1017/S1358246122000054 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2022

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> And that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans. This destructive ideology is grounded in misrepresentations of our country's history and its role in the world. Unfortunately, this maligned ideology is now migrating from the fringes of American society and threatens to infect core institutions of our country. But training like that discussed above perpetuates racial stereotypes and division and can use subtle, coercive pressure to ensure conformity of viewpoint. Such ideas may be fashionable in the academy, but they have no place in programs and activities sponsored by federal taxpayer dollars. Therefore, it shall be the policy of the United States not to promote race or sex, stereotyping or scapegoating in the federal workforce or in uniform services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes. In addition, federal contractors will not be permitted to inculcate such views in their employees.

It also summarizes the applicable groups that the executive order applies to. It includes federal contractors, executive agencies, the military, and recipients of federal grants. For anyone leading such training, whether as a contracter or a nonprofit organization funded by the United States government, there will be restrictions to what content they are allowed to communicate in the training.

What was the impact of the order? Applicable groups were required to submit all training materials to the proper authorities so that they could review the content to ensure that there was no presence of wording promoting the worries echoed in the executive order. Until such reviews were complete, training was suspended. There was also a hotline created so that anyone could report incidents involving training that violated the order. One of the things that happened as a result was the spread of fear. Many organizations were afraid to lose funding from the federal government. This fear led them to halt all diversity and inclusion work.

1. Terms Targeted

The order targeted any training that promoted 'the idea that America or Americans of any race or sex is inherently racist or evil'. More specifically, it's clear in documents and further communications that there were certain terms they believed echoed this particular idea. One of the terms was 'white privilege'. As defined, it is the belief that due to socially constructed racial hierarchies, as well as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history of colonialism and slavery, certain individuals have more access to certain rights, liberties, and fair treatment than others, based on race (e.g.., whites are, all things considered, more privileged than Black Americans). Other targeted terms in the order were 'critical race theory' and the 1619 Project. While I will not provide a full explanation of these terms and projects, I will provide a brief explanation of them to show where the order's concerns were misguided and ill-informed.

According to statements made by Trump at the 2020 White House conference on U.S. History, it is clear that he believed that 'critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American History is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country'. He also went on to note that it is 'toxic propaganda, it's ideological poison'. His statement also reveals a fear. There is a worry that if these concepts and themes continued to be taught, then it would 'dissolve our civic bonds and destroy our country'.

One way that we can respond is that if this is true, if what the executive order and Trump have suggested is correct (as far as it being poison and propaganda), then we do have reasons to be suspicious of the training. And we also have reasons, if we are the federal government, to not fund them. Let's call this Option A. But there's a second option on the table. If these claims are false, if it's not the case that these concepts are ideological poison, then we have reasons to lessen our suspicion of these kinds of claim. Let's call this Option B. Option B means we have reason to continue to fund these programs in accordance with our diversity and inclusion goals. Let's try to analyze if indeed these claims are true.

2. Critical Race Theory and its Critics

Critical race theory was a term that Trump targeted. For him and others, critical race theory is a 'Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression. It's being deployed to rip apart families, neighbors, and families'. Are Trump and those who agree with him correct?

To answer this question it is best to find out how scholars in critical race theory define their field. UCLA Law School, a school known for having many faculty who are critical race theorists, issued an online response to what they took to be a misinterpretation of their field of study by Trump and others. One of the things they accused Trump

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of is *misinterpretation*. This is how they define critical race theory: 'Critical race theory invites us to confront with unflinching honesty, how race has operated in U.S. History in our present, and to recognize the deep and ongoing operation of structural racism through which racial inequality is reproduced'. One of the central principles that they hold, which is the opposite of what Trump claims, is not that America or Americans are inherently racist. Rather, they claim that there is nothing inherent about race. Therefore, there seems to be a mismatch between what theorists say they are doing in the field and what non-academic critics believe the theorizing involves.

Critical race theorists also suggest that Trump was creating a caricature of critical race theory. In their view, critics were reducing 'a sophisticated field of knowledge to the simplistic absurdities that America is inherently racist'. In response to criticisms that critical race theory is anti-American propaganda, the scholars stated in simple terms that this was not the case. As opposed to being propaganda that the country does not need, defenders noted that critical race theory is necessary. If Americans really wanted to live up to their egalitarian principles, the promise of equality for all, it was critical race theory that would help them move in that direction. Defenders believed the Trump administration was misinterpreting what critical race theory was all about.

But there also was also a *misguided implication*. Recall President Trump believed that critical race theory has no place; both in Federal programs and America in general. On the other hand, defenders suggested that if you look at the impact that critical race theory has had on legislation, on court cases, on programming, and on policies, you will see that indeed it has a proper place – one that is aligned with the goals and principles of the country.

Here are some theoretical concepts that defenders of critical race theory point to in order to show that critical race theory has been helpful – not only with how we relate to each other in our day-to-day practices, but also how we go about achieving justice and treating people fairly. First, if employees learn about the theory of intersectionality (i.e., the idea that there are distinct and multifarious oppressions based on one's intersecting identities), it can help motivate federal programs to address the disparities that individuals face.

As opposed to the theory being divisive, defenders suggest that when federal employees learn about the dangers of implicit bias, (i.e., the unconscious bias that informs the way in which we treat others) and are aware of the dangers, then this can spur improvement in how we process information about others and it can allow

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

individuals to engage in fairer decision-making when they extend job opportunities to individuals, or to those receiving federal contracts. This is not divisive. This is in the service of promoting equality, which America professes it is committed to. If all of this is correct, then claims to the contrary reveal a misguided implication of these concepts.

3. The 1619 Project and its Critics

Another project that the Trump administration sought to rebuke is the 1619 Project. For Trump, 'by viewing every issue through the lens of race, they, individuals part of the project and the New York Times that sponsors it, they want to impose a new segregation, and we must not allow that'.

The 1619 project is a public history project sponsored by *The New York Times*, and created by Pulitzer Prize winner Nicole Hannah-Jones. According to its website, the project 'aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery, and the contributions of black Americans at the very center'. As opposed to this history being marginalized, as opposed to it being forgotten, as opposed to citizens acting like it never happened, the project wants to place the consequences of slavery, as well as the contributions of Black Americans at the heart of the U.S. National narrative. That's the explicit focus of the project. A look at the project's table of contents reveals its focus. In it, scholars provide a full history of slavery; explain the racial wealth gap; discuss the influence of Black music on freedom. Political theorists discuss the undemocratic assumptions of the U.S. Others provide a history and analyses of how Blacks have fought for freedom in the U.S. There are also essays that explore how race impacts the prison system.

For Trump and other critics, the 1619 project is viewing every issue through race. However, this too is a misinterpretation. The project is instead attempting to bring to the forefront that the history of America is a history of race. You can't talk about black music, for example, without talking about race. You can't also talk about the prison system without talking about race.

In response to the project, Trump and other critics, set up the 1776 Commission as way to rebuke the 1619 project and promote patriotic education. For critics, given the content of the 1619 Project, it is unpatriotic. And if it's unpatriotic, it is something that we do not need in America. But this is also a misguided implication. The 1619 project is reminding Americans that although our past and our present may be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

haunting, it is still true. And it's necessary for us to teach it. Just because it is haunting, doesn't mean that it's unpatriotic. There is no evidence that the 1619 project 'imposes segregation'. Instead, it exposes why America is segregated (e.g., by explaining how redlining occurred as well as its effects). Through public history, it exposes the history of segregation rather than imposes it. There is a valuable lesson to be learned. Just because we may be uncomfortable with the facts, doesn't mean that this discomfort equals or equates to 'division in the country.'

Claims made by critics in regards to these theoretical concepts and initiatives are untrue and unfounded. Therefore, the worries that stem from them are also unwarranted. This means that there is no justification for halting or defunding federal anti-racist training.

4. What Explains the Pushback?

I am going to provide an account of what I think is happening via these criticisms and defunding initiatives. I think reducing critics' reactions to being racist or sexist is too simplistic. More needs to be said.

One of the things on display in the critics' objection and worries is denial. There are several ways that we can deny our past and what's happening in the present. There's an explicit or literal denial in which we can claim that, 'Structural racism does not exist today.' But there's also a type of denial in which we acknowledge that wrongdoing has happened, but we overstate the progress we have made since. We may say, 'things are not as bad as they once were. Yes, wrongdoing may be happening, but it's not to the level that it once was'. This is downplaying of the wrongdoing. There are several ways in which individuals are experiencing these types of denials in relationship to racism.

But another thing on display in the critics' objections is a submersion of history. This occurs by not wanting to acknowledge the history of America. And there's no other scholar that has been able to articulate why and what happens when you try to submerge history better than W.E.B. Du Bois.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois attempts to provide a historical account of what Reconstruction in the United States was like for African-Americans. What were the impacts of it? And how did it help? In the last chapter – 'The Propaganda of History' – Du Bois discusses the seduction to submerge history. He says,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> How the facts of American history have in the last half-century have been falsified because the nation was ashamed. What are American children taught today? We have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history, that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans. If we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must give up the idea of history as in science. This may be fine romance, but it is not science. It may be inspiring, but it is certainly not the truth. And beyond this, it is dangerous. (1998, pp. 711–14).

By denying the reality that critical race theory is trying to illuminate; by denying our racial past which I think the 1619 project is trying to illuminate; and by getting in the way of how anti-racist trainers are trying to bring that knowledge into training to inform individuals, we repeat what Du Bois was concerned about. This denial and submerging are attempts to feed into a romance that we have of our nation. We pay a high price for depicting America or Britain or South Africa as equal in every way, as not racist, sexist, etc. One of the things that Du Bois reminds us is that this is not true, and purporting that it is can be dangerous.

So how is it dangerous? It can interfere with justice. How can you administer racial justice in your capacity as a federal employee when you are in denial that there are certain structures of racism that exists? This denial is going to interfere with your efforts. Also, submerging history affects our day-to-day lives. Think about what motivated Dylann Roof to go into a church in Charleston, South Carolina and kill eight African Americans after they invited him into their church. Roof had a different version of history and he wanted that romance of white supremacy to resurrect itself in reality. This is how denial and submerging negatively affects our day-to-day lives.

5. Going Forward

I am concerned about the precedent that this denial and submerging (via the executive order as well as current local initiatives) is going to have for future anti-racist training as well as school and university education.

If we accept that the claims and worries expressed through the executive order are false and therefore unwarranted, then we have reasons to lessen our suspicion of anti-racist training. And we can

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continue to fund them in accordance with our diversity and inclusion goals. That was Option B that I proposed earlier. However, given the misinterpretation and misguided implications I've described, they motivate me to make a revision.

Here's my revision: If the critic's claims are false then we have *more reason* to lessen our suspicion. And we have more reason to continue to fund these programs in accordance with our diversity and inclusion goals. Why? Because this shows that Americans are still misinformed about race, even our leaders. It shows that there's still a spread of misinformation from our leaders all the way down. It shows that Americans are still in denial about our racial past and also our racial present. It shows that the dangers that stem from them are occurring. And this all shows why anti-racist training and education needs to continue. The fact that there's so much misinformation, so much denial and so much mythmaking, makes a case for anti-racist training and education.

Frederick Douglass recalls in one of his biographies, *My Bondage, My Freedom*, the time when his mistress was teaching him how to read and his slave owner discovered her actions. His description of the experience illuminates the power of knowledge, but more particularly for our purposes, the power of racial knowledge. He says, 'Mr. Auld forbade continuance of her instruction telling her it was unlawful, it was unsafe and teaching …. a slave child how to read, could only lead to mischief… Learn him how to read, and he'll want to know how to write. And he'll be running away with himself'. Douglass continues, 'The effect of his words on me stirred up, not only my feelings into a sort of rebellion, but it awakened within me a slumbering train of vital thought. It was a special revelation'. This is what Douglass realized: 'Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave… And the very determination of his slave master to keep him ignorant,' he says, 'Only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence' (Douglass, 2014, pp. 117–18).

I believe that certain kinds of racial knowledge, no matter how uncomfortable it is, not only makes a contemporary child unfit to be a slave to racism, but racial knowledge – the kind that is being taught in anti-racist training programs – also makes individuals unfit to be a master. The very determination for the administration to keep individuals ignorant of this racial knowledge, should render us all the more resolute in seeking this racial intelligence through anti-racist training.

I also believe this misinformation makes a case for state funded programs too. So of course, the executive order's jurisdiction is federally-funded programs. The federal government can only have a say about

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

those programs that the federal government is funding. But given that it's not just federal programs that administer justice, there's a case to be made to take very seriously the continuation of anti-racist training for state-funded programs. If denial and submersion of history interferes with racial justice, but there are state-funded programs whose sole purpose is to administer justice, then they also need to be trained in these matters. If critical race theory, for example, shapes legislation, court cases, programs, and policies, this doesn't just take place on the federal level. It also takes place locally.

Going forward, anti-racist curricula should be peer reviewed and not politician reviewed. In academia, if there's a paper that I want to get published, that paper is sent to other experts in the field to evaluate the tenability of my claims, to ensure that the work is up to certain standards. Similarity, anti-racist programs should not be reviewed based on politically charged buzzwords. The training curricula need to be evaluated, not by politicians, but by historians, theorists, and other experienced trainers. They are more in a position to let us know if indeed the training violates the principles of the United States and historical facts, and if they are promoting not only propaganda, but false ideology.

Lastly, those with funding power, (e.g., political leaders and donors) should also participate in anti-racist training. If they are in positions of power and administering funds, there are certain facts and virtues they need to learn and cultivate. It's pretty clear that they need to learn to cultivate intellectual humility. When a president says that 'critical race theory is a Marxist ideology,' and says it with confidence as if it is true, then it shows our leaders can benefit from the training they are attempting to halt. In this training, they will learn that there is more to learn about race and that there is a lot they do not know. And it will help them learn certain facts and continue to learn them. This training can also help them cultivate racial, emotional intelligence. There are many critics who are responding to anti-racist training with fear, discomfort, and shame. But racial, emotional intelligence will teach them how to analyze their emotions (their racial emotions) and to manage them. It can help them make sure that just because they are uncomfortable with certain histories, that this shouldn't be reason to stop the dissemination of knowledge; a knowledge that can make us all free.

UC Riverside
myisha.cherry@ucr.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Myisha Cherry

References

Derrick Clifton, 'How the Trump administration's '1776 Report' warps the history of racism and slavery', *NBC News,* (January 20, 2021) https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/how-trump-administration-s-1776-report-warps-history-racism-slavery-n1254926.

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

Executive Order 13950 https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/28/2020-21534/combating-race-and-sex-stereotyping

UCLA Law School, 'UCLA Law Professors Set the Record Straight', (July 15, 2021), https://law.ucla.edu/news/critical-race-theory-news-ucla-law-professors-set-record-straight-0

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246122000054 Published online by Cambridge University Press